Orientalism, Star Power and Cinethetic Racism in Seventies Italian Exploitation Cinema

BY CALUM WADDELL | *University of Lincoln*

ABSTRACT

Focusing on such films as *The Man from Deep River* (Umberto Lenzi, 1972), *Last Cannibal World* (Ruggero Deodato, 1977) and *Black Emanuelle* (Bitto Albertini, 1975), this article suggests that the presentation of Asian "Otherness" in these films, in particular the "exotic girlfriend," is also developed to assist with the redemption of key white characters and our final appreciation of their grace under pressure. Nevertheless, with leading female stars, particularly the Burmese-born Me Me Lai and Indonesian Laura Gemser, these Italian exploitation cycles presented 1970s audiences with an influential vision of Asian star power. Whilst the roles may have been in the wider context of racist narratives and wrestled with a postcolonial panic about multiculturism, Lai and Gemser remain largely unacknowledged for proving that commercial cinema could be grounded on the promise of a newfound, and sometimes confident, Asian sexuality.

"There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power" (Said 44).

"Thailand – a country where two thirds of the jungle is still unexplored. Here, death reigns. They didn't know what kind of animal he was. They had never seen a white man before. And he had never seen such brutality. Barbaric violence was the law they lived by" (Voiceover from the international trailer of *The Man from Deep River*, Medusa Films, 1972).

"It seems impossible that today there are still primitive tribes who have never seen a white man. Tribes still living in the stone age. It is very dangerous here. In fact, we have to be continually protected by armed men" (Voiceover from the international trailer of *Last Cannibal World*, err Cinematografica, 1977).

Despite some recent academic writing on the race representation in blaxploitation cinema of the seventies[1], very little has been published in regard to how popular and comparable exploitation cycles have presented Asianness, particularly in the two decades that followed the removal of the Western colonial powers from the continent.[2] Ivo Ritzer, for instance, acknowledges that the Italian spaghetti western, Akira Kurosawa samurai film and what he dubs the "Chinese wuxia" cinema from Hong Kong shared both aesthetic and thematic tropes, as well as an interesting cross-cultural ethnoscape that included actors such as Lee Van Cleef and Lieh Lo (174). However, the author's enticing argument--which I draw upon further in this article--that Asian ethnicity becomes interchangeable (with Far Eastern actors playing characters from different countries – whether China or Japan) is downplayed slightly in favour of a wider discussion of how the kung-fu film might be seen as breaking down global cinematic barriers,

[1] See Yvonne Sims's *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Popular Culture* and Stephanie Dunn's *Baad Bitches and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films*.

[2] There are three more recent exceptions that kept the European powers in the East past the 1940s and 1950s: Britain governed Brunei until 1984 and Hong Kong until 1997, while Portugal remained responsible for Macau until 1999.

with its tropes reimagined within some spaghetti westerns. Whilst this conclusion is difficult to disagree with, the East-West discussion regarding the so-called "Chinese wuxia" is further complicated, by Hong Kong's placement during the genre's golden age as a British colony and Western outpost. The internationalism of Bruce Lee or the Shaw Brothers could be argued, much as with the Italian spaghetti western, to have more to do with a sense of exotic familiarity for the audiences abroad (heroes and villains, comedic set pieces, widescreen Hollywood-style photography, Mandarin language to maximise appeal to Chinese expat communities) as opposed to any imagined ethnic unfamiliarity. Witness, in comparison, how Hong Kong cinema flourished, including with English-language speakers; meanwhile, the less thematically-accessible Mainland Chinese film struggled (and struggles) to find an audience outside of Beijing, including with a scattered expat diaspora.

It is the intention of this article, however, to argue that the Italian exploitation cinema of this era, although often Orientalist insofar as showcasing a clear nostalgia for European domination and occupation of "savage" lands, is nonetheless important for introducing and grounding commercially successful cinematic presentations of Far Eastern sex appeal. As opposed to Ritzer, I do not intend to argue that the films themselves are internationalist insofar as integrating genres, or even in purposing a clear financial interest in other global commercial cinemas.[3] Rather, I maintain that at least two examples of female performers were given a rare chance to progress Asian sexuality (as a commercial vice) during the 1970s. Furthermore, such sexualisation still remains largely absent in Hollywood cinema, suggesting that mainstream America, even in an era of breakthrough popularity from attractive South Korean pop bands such as BTS and Blackpink, does not believe a wide audience exists for a similarly glamorous screen Asianness.[4] Even so, and as I will discuss, confusion about Asianness and Asian identity continues even in the Academy, making these films in need of some degree of retrospection.

In addition, despite the frequent, recurring, and sexist image of the "exotic girlfriend" in the 70s texts discussed in this paper, it can be argued that the Italian exploitation films of the 1970s initiate a problematic cinematic engagement with Southeast Asia and Southeast Asianness that can still be found in major American studio releases such as *Brokedown Palace* (20th Century Fox, 1999) and *The Hangover Part II* (Legendary Pictures, 2011). I will also discuss how and why this representation compliments images of carnally available, and exotic, female brides or sex partners with direct reference to the *Emmanuelle* (Trinarca Films, 1974) franchise and its many spin-off films. In doing so, I will maintain how this period led to a breakout career for Britain's first and generally unrecognised Asian sex symbol, the actress Me Me Lai (Fig. 1). Indeed, Lai, as well as her most comparable contemporary Laura Gemser, deserves far more recognition for at least maintaining a leading lady presence in a period where white women, such as Silvia Kristel, were believed to be a more sexually desirable box office alternative than a performer of Oriental ethnicity, even when a role such as Emmanuelle called for the latter. For this reason, Lai and Gemser--who headlined popular commercial exploitation cycles--deserve far more attention, and arguably even respect, than has been previously awarded to them.

At least one recent addition to addressing the time period of this article is the monograph *The Hollywood Meme* (2016), which contains a welcome look at the past cinematic trashiness of the Philippines under the Marcos regime. Author Iain Robert Smith acknowledges the Filipino appropriation of such Hollywood tropes as the spy-fi adventures of James Bond into low budget, satirical texts that adapt foreign ideas into an indigenous setting. Smith also argues that this appropriation of ideas from a dominant cultural form (Hollywood) into a third world locale (the Philippines, itself a former American colony) might be seen as a site of resistance: "One could quite imagine a study of transnational adaptations of Hollywood in terms of a subversive resistance to US hegemony, the Empire Writing Back through appropriating the very cultural artefacts which

[3] The Italian cannibal films, for instance, feature real animal slaughter – making them a likely turn-off for even the hardiest of horror movie fans in the 1970s and incomparable, in terms of their content, to other narrative-driven fiction motion pictures of the time. In addition, the Laura Gemser film *Emanuelle in America* (New Film Productions S.R.L., 1977) features a pornographic sequence involving a female cast member and a horse, again unlikely to indicate an eye for widespread box office success.

[4] Certainly, whilst Ritzer is correct to acknowledge the crossover appeal of kung-fu action stars such as Lieh Lo, any potential sex appeal was clearly never considered by western producers.

Fig. 1 | Me Me Lai in *The Man from Deep River*, 01:09:00. 88 Films,1973.

embody this hegemonic force" (27). It is difficult to maintain a similar line of defence for the Italian cannibal cycle, a brief run of extremely gruesome horror cinema that flourished during the 1970s after the success of *The Man from Deep River* in 1972, and continued into the early-to-mid 1980s. However, this conclusion is not because, as some have argued, the Italian cannibal film is a "rare instance of an Italian exploitation cycle not so obviously indebted to a Hollywood box office success before it" (Kerekes and Slater 49). Instead, as this paper will discuss, the cycle exists in a larger transnational discussion of postcolonial Asian representations, using a white, civilised European protagonist to position the former as synonymous with exoticism, savagery, and sexual availability. Nonetheless, having acknowledged this, it should be ascertained that Lai's Asianness – a clear selling point for the films that she starred in – can be seen, at least insofar as she is the leading actress (albeit to be lusted after by co-star and audience alike), to resist the Euro-normalcy of similar, sexually provocative cinema of this time.

At least initially, the Italian cannibal films were set in Southeast Asia. The thematic of the texts take the fish-out-of-water scenario from concurrent Hollywood westerns

The race-conflict, which in the American westerns of this period were situated around Native Americans and their resistance to European settlers, is adapted to exploit a sense of postcolonial unease about exotic lands.

such as *A Man Called Horse* (National General Pictures, 1970) and *Little Big Man* (National General Pictures, 1970), and introduces them to a horror narrative. The race-conflict, which in the American westerns of this period were situated around Native Americans and their resistance to European settlers, is adapted to exploit a sense of postcolonial unease about exotic lands. White explorers collide with violent but tightknit tribes who have never been colonised and thus remain "primitive" and "dangerous" (returning us to my opening quote from Said about how Westerners "dominate" and Asians are "the dominated"). Dialogue in these films is also unmistakably reactionary.

Underneath these offensive portrayals, however, we might also see a modern European voice entertaining an early identity crisis in the wake of post-war immigration from the former Eastern colonies.

In *Last Cannibal World*, for instance, the natives are referred to as "goddamn little monkeys" and "insufficient idiots" by the narrative's two white, European heroes. Attesting to the perceived need for European interventions and rule, we are told of their speech that "these are not words, these tribes don't know language as we know it." From this perspective, it is tempting to conclude that a film such as *Last Cannibal World* is little more than vulgar fascist and racist populism, but there is perhaps something more contemporary in the narrative, namely a backlash against Empire scrutiny and a rising tide of globalisation. This link can be seen a decade earlier in the popular Italian mondo-documentary cycle, with *Africa Addio* (Rizzoli Films, 1966) initiating a clear solidarity with British and French colonial endeavours. Making its leanings explicit, *Africa Addio* even ends with onscreen text that assures sceptical viewers: "This film, born without prejudices, does not attempt and has never attempted to create new ones. It has only tried to document the reality of how blood spilled anywhere represents a loss of wealth for the entire world." Prior to this, however, the exposition makes no secret of what side of the colonial debate it favours. The African continent itself is described as a "big black baby," and Europe is hailed as having "given far more than it has taken."

Recent writing on Italian cinema from Derek Duncan, albeit not addressing the country's exploitation films, also discusses this factor and is worth acknowledging. The author admits, for instance, that after World War II, and following the collapse of European rule in African, Asian, Caribbean, and Middle Eastern countries led initially to an influx of labourers into the former Empire nations. Italy, which had been a comparatively minor colonial power, was nonetheless not able to resist migration either: "The question of what it means to be Italian has been thrown wide open" (195). Duncan, drawing on some other authors in the field, looks at the representation of Albanians in popular Italian cinema, a discussion that seeks to position how race becomes integrated into the cinematic landscape as neither "Other" nor quite indigenous. Interestingly, such a hypothesis can also be lent to *Africa Addio* and even *Last Cannibal Word*: in the former, the directors express sorrow for European retreat from a foreign continent and celebrate the integration of workers in apartheid-era South Africa (arguing that "they" will evolve into "us"). In the latter, a similar, equally obnoxious, proposition is presented wherein suspense is drawn from the idea that Lai's beautiful but foreign tribeswoman can make it back to sanctuary in Europe with her white saviour, thus integrating herself into the "civilised." Duncan thus raises an important question that I will continue to discuss: what device do these "foreign" ethnicities serve in both the narrative of Italian exploitation cinema as well as in what they are attempting "sell"?

Marwan M. Kraidy also acknowledges that studies on cultural globalisation have fallen into two schools of thought: "as the transfiguration of worldwide diversity into a pandemic Westernised consumer culture" or "as a process of hybridisation in which cultural mixture and adaptation continuously transform and renew cultural forms" (16). The author challenges both, despite their prominence in the Academy. Reactionary films such as *The Man from Deep River* and *Last Cannibal World*, made by directors born before or shortly after the Second World War, may be seen to argue that Westernised consumer culture is not inevitable – even in an era of globalisation[5]. *Last Cannibal World* instead offers audiences a story of sophisticated Europeans and their various technical achievements, which are too far advanced for primitive Asians to even engage with, let alone understand. When a trapped explorer, played by Massimo Foschi, attempts to reason with the primitive tribe that captures him in *Last Cannibal World*, he is urinated on by the clan's infants and threatened with violence by the elders. The tribe believes that, having seen his airplane land near their cave,

[5] Umberto Lenzi, the director of *The Man from Deep River*, would drive this issue home in his later *Cannibal Ferox* (Dania Films, 1981), when a savage Latin American tribe comes across a victim's wallet and casually throws away his American Express card – i.e. globalisation counts for nothing without prior colonisation.

Fig. 2 | Me Me Lai and Massimo Foschi in *Last Cannibal World,* 00:53:41. Code Red, 1977.

he is actually some kind of bird-man, and their inability to comprehend modern technology leads them to frustration when their European captive proves unable to fly. As crude as these examples are, they are emblematic of the cycle's problematic and racist attitude towards Asia – a land where, without colonialism, the locals might have retained their savage manners forever. Underneath these offensive portrayals, however, we might also see (again, to build on Duncan's argument) a modern European voice entertaining an early identity crisis in the wake of post-war immigration from the former Eastern colonies. As such, it is not too far-fetched to believe that a film such as *Last Cannibal World* was made for an audience that needed a racist fantasy to feed its own cynicism towards the early stages of multiculturalism in Europe (Fig. 2).

This factor is part of the reason why the initial run of Italian cannibal films is worth acknowledging (as I will explain, the demarcation can be separated into those which depict Asianness and those which demonise Latin America, concurrent perhaps with shifting geographical concerns as the 1970s bleed into the 1980s). However, these films can also be seen to have introduced, grounded, and inspired a run of Asian leading ladies within the Italian film industry, including lesser-known names such as Chai Lee, the Chinese-Italian star of *Yellow Emanuelle* (Cineart Films, 1976) and, by extension, offered a competing Oriental sex appeal to viewers of exploitation cinema. Of course, through such hypersexual figures as Lee, they also provoke Orientalist assumptions – particularly regarding the exotic girlfriend (the sex partners for Lee in *Yellow Emanuelle* are also conspicuously white). Curiously, this exotic girlfriend presentation is not too far removed from a more recently commented upon phenomenon within the film studies lexicon: the so-called "magic negro" character.

In his famous article "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in 'Magical Negro' Films," Matthew Hughey describes the image of a recurring Hollywood film stereotype: the African-American character who exists to guide a white, usually male, protagonist to a romantically, spiritually, or financially fulfilling destiny. Describing this "cinethetic racism," Hughey refers to

> a stock character that often appears as a lower class, uneducated black person who possesses supernatural or magical powers. These powers are

Fig. 3 | Me Me Lai in *Eaten Alive!*, 01:17:13. Severin Films, 1980.

> used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation. (544).

However, it is also possible to argue that a similar cinethetic racism can be found in the tropes of the Italian cannibal cycle of the 1970s and their representation of Asianness. Although these films stop short of offering an Americanised view of the world, at least insofar as suggesting (per the "magical negro") that white privilege and success is concurrent with societal stability, they do attempt to juxtapose the uncolonized savage with the submissive coloniser. Similar, then, to "cinethetic racism" in African-American representations, these films also provide a submissive, typically female character, who assists with guiding the European character(s) to safety and risks her life to do so. The narrative of the early Italian cannibal film is thus unmistakably cynical about Asian identity and government, but they also repeat an early facet of colonial societies in the Far East, which is that Oriental sexuality is desirable and easily available. For instance, author Piers Brendon mentions how a visiting writer to the island of Hong Kong, during early colonial rule, would note the "lovely slim young Chinese girls and their neat and graceful half-foreign dresses" (637). Only through dominating this enticing and mysterious sexuality can the brave, trepid European manage to complete his or her own adventure within the Italian cannibal narrative and find spiritual satisfaction.

To further highlight this argument and how what we might see as Asian "cinethetic racism" functions in this cycle, I will use the example of actress Me Me Lai in her roles in *The Man from Deep River* and *Last Cannibal World*. In introducing this argument, it is important to maintain that *The Man from Deep River*, a largely unknown exploitation film outside of fans of "video nasties" or the Italian cannibal filone in general, is far more influential – at least insofar as grounding representations of Asian sexuality in the cinema of the 1970s – than has previously been recognised. Both *The Man from Deep River* and *Last Cannibal World* are set in Southeast Asia, and Lai plays a glamorous tribal woman in each, unable to understand or speak English but increasingly more obsessed with a captured white European male who later has the opportunity to sexually dominate her. In *The Man from Deep River*, Lai dies shortly after childbirth, whereas in *Last Cannibal World*, she escapes from her tribe

Fig. 4 | Laura Gemser in *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals*, 00:30:48. 88 Films, 1977.

with an English explorer who proceeds to knock her unconscious and rape her. In the following scene, removed from the film's UK DVD release, Lai serves her attacker fresh fruit and shows her loyalty, both sexual and spiritual, to him. She is later captured and eaten by her own people as revenge for her decision to copulate with a foreigner. The European later wins a tribal conflict, but his ultimate "success" and subsequent humiliation to the primitives is that he has bedded their most sought-after woman.

The most famous production of the Italian cannibal cycle is undoubtedly *Cannibal Holocaust* (F.D. Cinematografica, 1980), a film that, despite its initial critical dismissal,[6] has undergone some contemporary reappraisal.[7] It is curious that when the cycle reaches a new decade with its most famous instalments, *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Cannibal Ferox* (Dania Films, 1981), Amazonia and the small port city of Leticia in Colombia replaces Southeast Asia as the narrative location. The reason for this decision might be found in *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* (New Film Productions S.R.L., 1977), which takes Indonesian actress Laura Gemser and her "Black Emanuelle" character to Brazil, despite the fact the filmmakers are clearly shooting in an Italian national park (complete with non-indigenous animals such as African chimpanzees and a Burmese python). Nonetheless, the juxtaposition of Gemser's cosmopolitan Indonesian allure (she is introduced as a sophisticated, well-travelled journalist working in New York) with "primitive" Latin Americans may have sabotaged further attempts to repeat the beautiful, but savage, Oriental of Lai. As such, when Lai reappears in the cycle with *Eaten Alive* (Dania Films, 1980), she is cast against her previous exotic

Lai's cannibal films can thus be seen to engage in a wider dialogue with other Italian exploitation cycles, in particular the Black Emanuelle franchise.

[6] Landis, for instance, belittles the film as being "grotesque and beyond vile" (211).
[7] See Mikita Brottman's *Offensive Films.*

Fig. 5 | Laura Gemser in *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals*, 01:10:45. 88 Films, 1977.

girlfriend stereotype as an unwilling member of a Jonestown-style religious cult who seeks to flee her Western captors and escape to New York. She does not succeed and, per the title's promise, is held at knifepoint and indeed "eaten alive" (Fig. 3). Gemser's Asianness, then, whilst still of sexual availability as part of her exotic girlfriend role, is adaptable to a modern, professional, big-city career and setting.

Lai's cannibal films can be seen to engage in a wider dialogue with other Italian exploitation cycles, in particular the *Black Emanuelle* franchise (San Nicola Produzione Cinematografica, 1975). In his discussion of Albertini's *Return of Shanghai Joe* (C.B.A. Produttori e Distributori Associati, 1975), Ritzer acknowledges that the director often fails to ground the Asian descent of his characters, noting that "the ethnic origins of the Asians are no longer of any interest" (170). This criticism could also be lent to *Black Emanuelle*. Before discussing this further, it is worth pointing out that while Gemser's and Lai's screen Asianness are not entirely identical, neither would have evolved without the other. *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* would not exist without *The Man from Deep River*, and it is interesting to contrast how Gemser's Asianness is juxtaposed with her exotic backdrop vs. Lai and her timid but seductive tribeswoman. As seen in Fig. 4, Gemser's glamorous photo-journalist joins a small group of fellow American explorers in setting out to the Amazonas to find out if the legend of an ancient cannibal tribe is true in *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals*. She has a profession and a clear narrative purpose. Lai, on the other hand, portrays a mysterious primitive sexual exoticism that is lusted after by a European captive who must, in order to sustain his survival, take her virginity and "dominate" her, as happens in both *The Man from Deep River* and *Last Cannibal World*.

Gemser's Asianness is also presented as desirable (including to her male *and* female co-stars), and in *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals*, her beauty saves at least one of her Caucasian colleagues from death. Gemser pretends to be an exotic "Water God," arising from the Amazon river amid some shots from a flare gun ("the Indios are very superstitious," she reassures one of her lovers), and the besotted natives allow her to take her colleague to safety, enthralled by her Asian beauty. There is still some cinethetic racism here – with the presentation of Gemser alluding to the "magical negro" character whose stock is to provide safety to the perplexed white personalities and monetary sexual gratification to the primitive

Amazonians – there can be little doubt that her Black Emanuelle character has more independence than Lai's equally hypersexual tribeswoman. *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* is the most blatant attempt to rewrite the cannibal film narrative, and in particular, its representation of the "savage" but irresistible, and ultimately subservient, Asian – sexually conquered and deflowered in her own land and frustrated among her own (desexualised) people. As bizarre as it might sound, it is not improbable that the producers behind the successful *Black Emanuelle* series were engaged in an attempt to appropriate Lai's Asianness, and especially her exotic girlfriend persona, into a more modern setting and dominant persona.

Gemser also brings a more predatory sexuality to her roles than Lai – she sleeps with multiple characters and usually on terms which she initiates (albeit in narratives designed to guide her through as many sexually exploitative scenarios as possible). This factor is in stark contrast to Lai's rape and domination, which she eventually shows a fondness for, in *Last Cannibal World*. Nevertheless, Gemser is still – as with Lai – represented as the exotic girlfriend. Besotted white men, and women, are seen vying for her sexual attention and find themselves unable to return to "normal" same-race relationships afterwards. If cinethetic racism involves an ethnic minority altering the purpose and spiritual wellbeing of the dominant skin colour, then Gemser's *Black Emanuelle* still fulfils this role. In postcolonial Kenya, the setting for *Black Emanuelle*, Gemser finds herself among wealthy white landowners who have created a "safe space" in the country's vast highlands[8]. Immediately desirable, Gemser's Asianness intrudes and disrupts the general white-on-white orgies and exclusive expat parties of Nairobi (which, in the narrative, is interchangeable with sub-Saharan African identity; despite her clear Oriental ethnicity, Gemser is asked more than once if she is local to Kenya). At the conclusion of the original *Black Emanuelle*, an unhappily married bourgeois English man (played by Angelo Infanti) travels miles outside of the Kenyan capital to try and stop Emanuelle from leaving the country so that she can consider a life with him. She turns him down and moves on with her adventures – the first indication that the series intends to progress in a different direction, at least superficially, from Lai's cannibal filone and their representation of the "exotic girlfriend" as trophy partner to a wealthy and "deserving" European male.

I use the term "filone" here in the wake of Mikel Koven's study of the Italian giallo, which the author sees as being part of the wider horror or crime genre. Koven sees in the giallo a "cluster of concurrent streamlets, veins, or traditions—*filone*" (6). Similarly, I would argue that the Italian cannibal film, which had a not inconsiderable five-year gap between *The Man from Deep River* and *Last Cannibal World* and *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals*, be seen as part of a wider genre in Italian exploitation-horror which would become notorious during the British "video nasty" period for its heightened practical special effects (see Ega) and images of women under threat (Fig. 5). I have already mentioned how both *The Man from Deep River* and *Last Cannibal World* exist in dialogue with Laura Gemser's *Black Emanuelle* franchise, particularly in changing the "exotic girlfriend" from submissive and besotted to somewhat dominant and independent. However, the link between various Italian horror films of this period, representing different filone, is also clear in the occasional use of exotic settings: *Zombie Flesh-Eaters* (Variety Films, 1979) uses the Caribbean, *Anthropophagous* (Filmirage, 1980) is staged on a deserted Greek island, and *Alien Contamination* (Alex Cinematografica, 1980) takes its action to Colombia. In some cases, these exotic locations allude to colonial history – *Zombie Flesh-Eaters*, for instance, makes direct reference to conquistadors and ancient black magic rituals, but usually it is to initiate the fear of being a white "civilised" European in an anarchistic land.

The Italian horror film remained profitable and prolific during the 1970s. As mentioned by Stefano Baschiera, the proliferation of second- and third-run cinemas across Italy, coupled with the import market of the UK, the United States et al. supported indigenous, low-budget genre products throughout the decade (45-46). The author also acknowledges how "1980s Italian horror has been analysed by scholars [. . .] through its most iconic sub-genres: cannibal and zombie films," but then adds that the former "started at the end of the 1970s" (48). However, it is *The Man from Deep River* that signals the beginning of the filone as well as its relationship with Asian representations. Most of the cast

[8] See Caroline Elkins's *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya.*

Fig. 6 | Laura Gemser under threat in *Emanuelle in America*, 00:04:33. Mondo Macabro, 1977.

is Thai, with leading man Ivan Rassimov as the sole white character with any dialogue in the entire film. Although Rassimov is Italian, he plays an Englishman in the narrative.

The Italian cannibal films, which Kay Dickinson acknowledges "concoct lurid fantasies about the non-Western world" (172), typically feature a white explorer, beset by "primitive," antagonistic foreign natives. For instance, *The Man from Deep River* has Rassimov's European travel photographer kidnapped by a tribe near the Thai-Burmese border and subjected to extensive punishments for his intrusion into their waters. The tribe mistakes him for a fishman when they see him snorkelling in the water near its village. What makes the 1970s strain of these films unique is that the white protagonist usually finds some kind of spiritual affirmation through a romance with a beautiful Asian woman or, as in *Mountain of the Cannibal God* (Dania Films, 1978), via being worshipped as a sexual deity. In each case, the message is provocative and clear: white, European sexuality is "sophisticated and dominant" (the coloniser), whereas Asian sexuality is "submissive and dominated" (the colonised). The films, despite their Italian nationality, act as a surprising nostalgia for European colonial thought, with only *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals* – thanks to the presence of Gemser – attempting to work against the filone's narrative worship of whiteness. Nonetheless, if the concept of Orientalism involves "the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (Said 15), then a film such as *The Man from Deep River* plays a critical part in understanding how early exploitation filone sustain this perception of the Far East.

When academic discussion of the Italian cannibal film has surfaced, as from Mikita Brottman (1996), Dickinson (2007), or Danny Shipka (2011), it has frequently been around the more infamous *Cannibal Holocaust* and with minimal, if any, reference to ethnicity or location. Perhaps this lack of attention is because, for any interested researcher, the relationship of the Italian cannibal texts to nationhood, ethnic representation, and even "Asianness" is confusing. Bernard, for instance, mentions how the films tend to "blend documentary realism with fictional filmmaking" (Baschiera and Hunter 162), but does not address how this stylistic attribute is muddied by an additional, and clear, *anti-realism* in regard to setting and race. Part of the racism most emblematic of Lai's cannibal films, and also the Gemser *Black Emanuelle* films, is

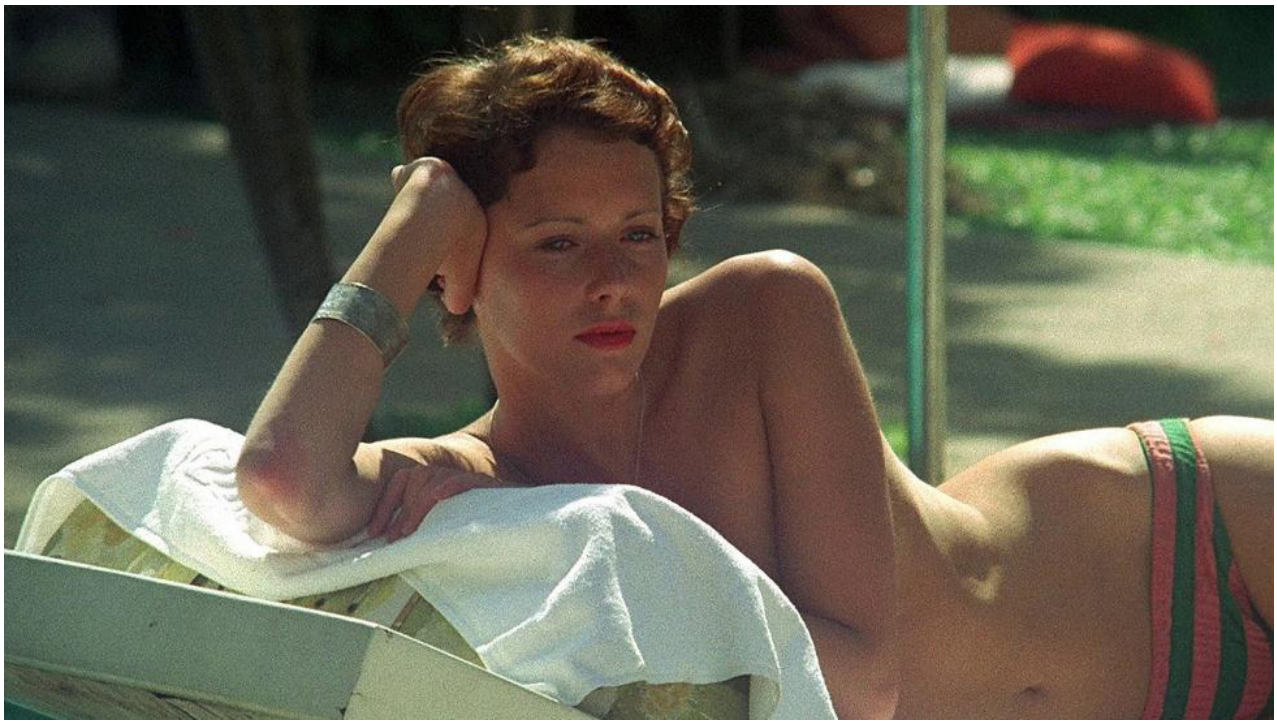

Fig. 7 | Not Quite Thailand: Dutch model Silvia Kristel as *Emmanuelle*, 00:14:49. Studio Canal, 1974.

that Asian identity is considered transferable and indefinable. One does not need to be from anywhere in Asia because these films make it clear that Asian people are one and the same. As mentioned, Gemser also becomes transferable to Africa. Her first appearance in *Black Emanuelle*, on an airplane from New York to Nairobi, has a white passenger engage with her in Swahili, assuming that she is African. Gemser's exotic, clearly Indonesian ethnicity thus becomes interchangeable with a perception of the "dark continent." In later *Black Emanuelle* films, Gemser's race goes unacknowledged, suggesting cynicism towards the audience for these exploitation texts and a presumption that they would not even know where Indonesia is.

Adding to the confusion, despite claiming to be set in Mindanao in the Philippines, an island that still remains under martial law today due to Islamic separatists, *Last Cannibal World* uses Malaysia, most notably the iconic Batu Caves near Kuala Lumpur, and Malaysian actors to play the onscreen tribespeople, with Lai as the sole exception. The [Orientalist] assumption was presumably that no one would notice the racial difference between a Malaysian and a Filipino, let alone someone of Burmese ancestry. This confusion of Oriental identity continues in the cycle with *Mountain of the Cannibal God*, which is set in New Guinea but mainly filmed in Sri Lanka, and with Sri Lankan actors as the tribespeople, as well as *Eaten Alive!* (Umberto Lenzi, 1980), which comes from the same production company (Dania Films) and uses the same confusion between setting and location. Not only are the onscreen locations accepted as fact by Shipka, but also the supposed "third world" setting is treated with appalling disdain by the author, who seems to believe that shooting in developing countries is somehow concurrent with austerity scenery. Speaking of *Mountain of the Cannibal God*, Shipka notes how the "film does boast some slick production values, belying the fact that a majority of the film was shot in Sri Lanka and Malaysia" (119) – as if the filmmakers would have been better off recapturing the stunning Southeast Asian scenery in a Hollywood studio. Despite the popularity of *Cannibal Holocaust*, which has surely overshadowed previous films, the filone is thus a generally unrecognised but important part of popular and commercial Asian representation of the 1970s – particularly when even now authors indicate little knowledge of where they were filmed. Given that tourist-friendly Asian locations such as

Fig. 8 | Laura Gemser vs. nature in *Emanuelle* and the *Last Cannibals*, 00:33:47. 88 Films, 1977.

That the Burmese Lai would play both Japanese and Chinese at the start of her acting career anticipates the later, aforementioned Orientalist assumption that all Far Eastern races are one and the same – and this would become an even more explicit factor of Lai's first leading roles.

Malaysia can still encourage such disdainful comments, it could even be said that some of these films were ahead of their time.

Before the blockbuster *Emmanuelle* took its young, white swinger, played by Silvia Kristel, to Thailand – presented as a nation of sexual debauchery – *The Man from Deep River* introduced a similar fish-out-of-water story of someone seduced by the country's lurid beauty and irresistible, "exotic" women. Attesting to Lai's success in the role of an alluring and sexually available tribal woman, the actress mentions that her second film in the filone, *Last Cannibal World*, was pre-sold on the guarantee that she would be starring in it:

> I believe that our sequel was sold well before *Last Cannibal World* was made. A cinema company, whose name I forget, paid all of my expenses for me to go to Australia to promote *The Last Cannibal World*. I was there for about three weeks and it was first class travel, a nice hotel and a chauffeur driven car! I appeared on all the famous talk shows over there and I recall someone telling me that if I was in a film, it was sold instantly to the Far East. How true this was, I cannot say, but I was having a great time! (Lai qtd. in Waddell 50)

In both films, Lai exists as a character who assists in solving white European problems, especially topical to the postcolonial lands she finds herself inhabiting (it is made clear in *The Man from Deep River* that the tribe is present in a lawless border between Thailand and Burma). Born in

Burma (today's Myanmar), raised in London, and currently residing in Essex where she is a grandmother and retired policewoman[9], actress Me Me Lai could lay claim to being Britain's first international Asian sex symbol, although she is given little recognition for this. Marketing herself with an exotic-sounding nom-de-plume in the early 1970s and (come the middle of the decade) large breast implants, the actress and model would first take to the screen as a typical example of Oriental window dressing:

> I got into acting, and also modelling, through some girlfriends who did some extra work on films and television. I also did some walk-on roles and my first speaking part was at the BBC – it was for the series *Omnibus* and in the episode entitled *The Life Story of Modigliani*. I play a French-Chinese girl called Elvira, who is painted by Modigliani. Peter McEnery played Modigliani. I have still never seen this particular *Omnibus* episode. (Lai qtd. in Waddell 48)

Following this minor beginning, Lai would be cast as a Japanese character called Chi-San in *Crucible of Terror* (Glendale Films, 1971). The actress would also lend her skills to the role of a hypersexual, easily-seduced young Chinese expat called Nan Lee in *The Au Pair Girls* (Kenneth Shipman Productions, 1972). That the Burmese Lai would play both Japanese and Chinese at the start of her acting career anticipates the later, aforementioned Orientalist assumption that all Far Eastern races are one and the same, and this would become an even more explicit factor of Lai's first leading roles. In both films Lai's *exoticism*, rather than her actual ethnicity proper, is deemed exploitable and interchangeable: she merely needs to be indiscriminately "Asian" in order to fit with what each director presumes women of the East want and need (typically a "dominant" and hunky European male). Not only is this fact illustrated by Lai's romance with captured and tormented European Ivan Rassimov in *The Man from Deep River,* but also by the original Italian title for the film: *Il paese del sesso selvaggio*. The translation reads as "The land of savage sex," a nod to previous literary depictions of Thailand and an anticipation of the country's representation in *Emmanuelle*, which famously features travelogue-style documentation of Bangkok's notorious Soi Cowboy red light district.

The stereotype of Thai ladies as sexy, sinful and sordid (but never Thai men – in both *The Man from Deep River* and *Emmanuelle*, the male characters are predatory, violent or a mix of both) has a long legacy, which includes the British novel *A Woman of Bangkok* (also known as *A Sort of Beauty*, published in 1956). However, it could also be argued, given the interchangeable nature of "Asianness" during the 1970s and highlighted by Lai's ability to be cast as Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and finally Filipino (in *Last Cannibal World*), that the more notorious *The World of Suzie Wong* (from author Richard Mason, published in 1957), set in colonial Hong Kong, added to the mystique of the Far East as a paradise of easily available, impossibly beautiful women for the wealthy European Playboy. *Emmanuelle 2* (Trinacra Films, 1975) swaps Bangkok for Hong Kong and even introduces to the softcore filone Indonesian pin-up Laura Gemser, whose beauty would later catalogue the *Black Emanuelle* spin-off series (Fig. 6). In *Emmanuelle 2*, her Asianness goes unspecified: she just *is*. Assuming that it was her *Emmanuelle 2* performance that instigated the *Black Emanuelle* spin-off filone, it is strange that her race later becomes African and not Asian. In addition, *Emmanuelle 2* also anticipates the portrayal of Lai's "savage" but sexual Filipino in *Last Cannibal World* by opening with a blonde, blue-eyed Caucasian woman recounting her rape by four Filipino maids during her stay in Hong Kong. The story is told to Emmanuelle (Silvia Kristel) as she sails to the former British colony on the lower deck of a crowded passenger ship and prompts her arousal. Again, the message is clear: Asian sexuality (not dissimilar to the "funky" Jack Johnston-type black presentations of the key blaxploitation cinema of this era) is "exotic," "mysterious," and even possibly "savage."

Nevertheless, Lai's prominent role as the exotic girlfriend in *The Man from Deep River* remains trendsetting because it showcases what cinema had generally avoided: Oriental beauty as preferable to Western beauty. For as racist as the exotic girlfriend depiction might be, and Lai's instant gooey-eyed subservience to the white actor Ivan Rassimov is certainly troubling, *The Man from Deep River* sets up the

[9] See the documentary *Me Me Lai Bites Back: Resurrection of the Cannibal Queen* on the American Blu-Ray of *Eaten Alive!* for more details.

image of an Asian female, and of Thai women, that would prevail in [s]exploitation films throughout the 1970s. In 1975, for instance, audiences saw Laura Gemser visit the capital with *Emanuelle in Bangkok* (Flaminia Produzioni Cinematografiche, 1976). In addressing *The Man from Deep River* as a formative film in its representation of the exotic girlfriend, whilst being the first to introduce Thailand as a nation of "savage sex," it is hopefully now possible to see how this lesser-known exploitation film and its filone influenced further examples of Asianness in later seventies exploitation cinema. Were the film to have been successful outside of its grindhouse audience, it is not too difficult to imagine that Lai's exoticism might have even changed the direction of *Emmanuelle*, which is based on the adventures of Thai author Emmanuelle Arsan. When the film was cast, however, Dutch model Silvia Kristel filled the role instead (Fig. 7). This decision, decades later, begs the question of what is more problematic: Lai's "exotic" girlfriend role, in which she "saves" a white European from certain death in *The Man from Deep River* and *Last Cannibal World* – in no small part due to her sexual availability – or the absence of an Asian leading lady in a film based on the (possibly fictional) life of a Thai author.

The Italian cannibal filone and the *Black Emmanuelle* film series provide problematic Asian representations, but seen in the context of the 1970s, these cycles also allowed two female performers, Lai and Gemser, to reach cult stardom and maintain a legitimate presence in the European cinema of the time and across different demarcations (Fig. 8). Moreover, unlike the male Asian stars that appeared in, for instance, the spaghetti western cycle, both were permitted to "sell" their respective films on a rare and unique presentation of Eastern sexual allure – sold, however explicitly and even perhaps cynically, as preferable to the European "norm." Gemser would go on to gain critical acclaim for her (clothed) leading role in *Love is Forever* (Hall Bartlett Productions, 1982), where she portrays a character of Laotian descent, again testifying to the transnational nature of Asian ethnicity for producers of the time, whilst Lai would work with Lars Von Trier, headlining his early classic *Element of Crime* (Det Danske Filminstitut, 1984). Whilst both would retire from acting before the end of the 1980s, their status as sex stars of the seventies is certainly comparable to, for example, Pam Grier in her blaxploitation films, insofar as shaping a wider dialogue about female race representation. And even if Grier has been accused, by at least one scholar, as offering a "pornographic vision of the black female body through a racist, patriarchal narrative structure" (Dunn 17), at least one can attest, even if in agreement of such criticism, that the actress – by way of her success – created a template for other African-American performers to build on. Similarly, from the Bangkok-setting of *Emmanuelle* to the spin-off *Yellow Emmanuelle* and beyond, Lai and Gemser were the original exotic girlfriends. And whilst their cinematic journey often did involve clear cinethetic racism by way of assisting white characters toward personal gain, either survival or spiritual or sexual satisfaction, they also provided an early insight of how Asianness could "sell" a film on the world stage. For this purpose, both deserve to be reassessed as trendsetting figures in cult cinema – even if their respective and exploitative filones will give scholars of race representations plenty to denounce. ■

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